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Last year, the agency established a ... callers in many states already have that option for intrastate calls.

Probe Finds Errors, but No Misconduct, In Work by Lead-Poisoning Researcher

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By David Stipp
Staff Reporter of The Wall Street Journal

Federal investigators said they found no evidence of scientific misconduct by a prominent lead-poisoning researcher but raised concerns about "numerous errors and misstatements" in his published work.

The statement ended three years of formal investigations of University of Pittsburgh researcher Herbert Needleman. His work has helped raise national concern about adverse health effects of lead but has been sharply challenged by critics, who assert that Dr. Needleman used shoddy research methods that exaggerated lead's harm.

In a letter summarizing its findings, the National Institutes of Health's Office of Research Integrity, or ORI, exonerated Dr. Needleman of the most serious charges made by his critics. But the ORI's statement provided ammunition for critics' assertions that Dr. Needleman has conducted "substandard" science and thus shouldn't be a government adviser on lead.

The ORI said Dr. Needleman should submit corrections to various scientific journals regarding the inaccuracies it found.

Both sides claimed victory based on the ORI's statement.

"The main thing is that there was no scientific misconduct" by Dr. Needleman, said James Lieber, an attorney for Dr. Needleman. "That really is the bottom line here." He added that while the ORI found some mistakes in Dr. Needleman's work, it echoed an earlier finding by a University of Pittsburgh investigative panel that the errors didn't affect the validity of his research findings on lead.

But Claire Ernhart, a lead researcher at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland who is one of Dr. Needleman's main critics, said that the ORI report shows there are "serious flaws" in Dr. Needleman's research. Dr. Needleman's "substandard science is the most critical thing" disclosed by the ORI investigators, Dr. Ernhart said.

1979 Study

The NIH began its investigation in 1991 after Dr. Ernhart and Sandra Scarr, a child-development specialist at the University of Virginia, filed a complaint with the agency raising doubts about a landmark 1979 study published in the New England Journal of Medicine by Dr. Needleman and colleagues. The study suggested levels of lead in the body too low to cause overt poisoning could lower children's IQs.

In the study, Dr. Needleman's team collected fallen-out baby teeth from more than 2,000 children to check their cumulative lead exposures. Based on IQ tests given to 158 of the children, who were divided into high-lead and low-lead groups, they reported that elevated lead levels lowered IQ by about four points. Dr. Needleman's critics charged, among other things, that he used dubious methods to divide the children into the two lead-level groups, potentially biasing the results to exaggerate adverse IQ effects of lead.

In an investigation completed in 1992, the University of Pittsburgh panel concluded that Dr. Needleman didn't purposefully skew the results and wasn't guilty of scientific misconduct. But the panel found that there was a "preponderance of circumstantial evidence" that Dr. Needleman deliberately misrepresented "substandard" methods in the study, possibly so it "would appear to be a more adequate basis for public policy regarding environmental controls for lead."

Dr. Needleman hotly disputes the charge of deliberate misrepresentation and is seeking its retraction in a lawsuit against the university. The ORI's complete report on its investigation, which wasn't immediately available, is "silent" on the issue of deliberate misrepresentation, said Lyle Bivens, ORI director.

'Misplotted' Points on Graph

While mostly echoing the university's earlier investigation, the ORI also addressed longstanding allegations about a widely cited graph by Dr. Needleman that the university panel didn't address. The graph, variations of which Dr. Needleman has published often, suggests that even very low levels of lead have significant IQ-lowering effects on the population as a whole.

The ORI, however, said data points have been repeatedly "misplotted" on the graph in a "misleading depiction" that overstates adverse lead effects. Dr. Needleman should submit corrections to journals for both the graph and his 1979 study, ORI said.

The study at issue was only one of many on the lead issue, and the ORI findings aren't likely to have much bearing on the continuing question of what danger very low levels of lead pose to children.